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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000015

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: FARC FALLS FROM FRONT PAGE AS
BLAME GAME HEATS UP

REF: A. BOGOTA 0005
[B.](#) CARACAS 0007
[C.](#) 07 CARACAS 2410
[D.](#) 07 CARACAS 2398

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SUMMARY

[1.](#) (SBU) Days before Christmas Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez stated that a mission to liberate three FARC-held hostages ("Operation Emmanuel") would commence December 28th. As of January 4, the hostages remain captive, international observers have left Colombia accusations of blame are flying and news headlines highlight other stories.

[2.](#) (U) Newspapers and newscasts still give updates on Operation Emmanuel, but the focus has turned from optimism and guessing when the three may be freed to reporting on whom is accusing whom for the mission's failure. Most news outlets also are covering speculation that a child left at a Colombian orphanage is the son of hostage Clara Rojas. However, the story has slipped from front-page, above-the-fold coverage as issues such as Chavez, amnesty for political prisoners and the introduction of the new "Bolivar Fuerte" monetary system take its place.

DOTH PROTEST TOO MUCH?

[3.](#) (SBU) Chavez and his supporters have (predictably) blamed Colombian President Uribe for the mission's failure, citing the FARC assertion that they were unable to return the hostages due to Colombian military activity. According to the Associated Press, Chavez accused Uribe of lying about many aspects of the mission and said that Uribe "placed a bomb" on the operation by suggesting the FARC no longer had the son of Clara Rojas in their custody. Even U.S. film director Oliver Stone (invited by Chavez to take part in the rescue operation) weighed in, telling the AP that the FARC have no reason not to release the hostages and that the failure to secure freedom falls on President Uribe. "Shame on Colombia," he said. "Shame on Uribe."

[4.](#) (SBU) The neutral daily "El Nacional" reported that the Argentine Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana said the mere act of participating in the attempt was valuable for his country, even though the FARC did not release the hostages. He also

denied press statements that former President Nestor Kirchner saw himself as trapped between Chavez and Uribe and said that Kirchner "does not reject" the idea of returning to Colombia to help free the hostages.

15. (U) According to the AP, Chavez told the hostages, families that he still has a channel open with the FARC and that "the operation hasn't been stopped." A report in the opposition-oriented daily "El Nuevo Pais" supports this by quoting unidentified "intelligence sources" who stated the hostages could be freed by the end of this week. The Secretary General of the Organization of American States,

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Jose Miguel Insulza, also seemed to support this notion in articles published in the neutral El Nacional and pro-government daily "VEA" by stating that it is still possible the hostages will be released and thus the mission should not be branded a failure.

16. (U) On its website, as reported by several papers such as the English-language, pro-government "Daily Journal", the FARC stated that Colombia had sabotaged the process by conducting military operations in the area designated for the hostage handover.

AN ORPHAN OR NOT?

17. (U) Local media also gave prominent coverage to Uribe and Luis Carlos Restrepo, Colombia's high commissioner for peace, who defended Colombia, stating that the government made every effort to accommodate Chavez, and the FARC's demands. Uribe said a main reason for the failure was that the FARC did not have all of the hostages it claimed. The son of Clara Rojas, he stated, may in fact be a child (identified as Juan David Gomez) left at a Colombian orphanage more than two years ago and currently living in a

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Bogota foster home. According to "El Nacional," blood samples from Clara Rojas, mother and brother (Clara de Rojas Gonzalez and Ivan Gonzalez) have been taken to compare their DNA to the child's to confirm the boy is Rojas, son. (Several papers also had articles on the DNA testing process and how DNA can determine lineage.)

A TARNISHED CHAVEZ

18. (SBU) Despite Venezuelan government attempts to depict Uribe as the bad guy, this failure has tarnished President Chavez, image in most local media in Venezuela and around the world. Many media outlets report on political parties and the families of Venezuelan hostages asking why Chavez has not spent any time trying to get his countrymen released from the FARC. People are publicly questioning Chavez, commitment to his own country and accusing him of mere grandstanding. A recent editorial in "El Nacional" stated the operation was a farce and accused the president of being a showman.

19. (SBU) Overall, reporting and public opinion has gone from mostly cautiously optimistic to disillusioned and even cynical, with many news outlets stating that Chavez has embarrassed himself and others in an attempt to garner positive news coverage for himself and be seen as a hero.

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